COMMUNICATION, INTERACTION, AND MOTIVATION: FOLLOWING THEORETICAL FOOTPRINTS OF DISTANCE EDUCATION

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This paper revisits theoretical and conceptual lenses of distance education in order to identify the current state of the art and explore what do we have and then what do we need to provide meaningful learning experiences. The paper argues that the knowledge and experiences gained in the field of distance education provide working solutions and clear walkthroughs to design learning spaces where learners can build a learning community, start a journey with a high intrinsic motivation, then interact, and communicate to intellectually grow.

INTRODUCTION

Distance education is defined by the separation of learners in time and space. On the other hand, the capacity increase in technology eliminates most of the limitations that derive from the distance in time and space. As such, strategies to sustain interaction and communication has become an important aspect of instructional design in distance education. Nevertheless, transactional distance is still a major issue because the solutions to ensure and enable it doesn't depend on the technological affordances, yet depends on the design of the course, interaction, communication, and motivational channels embedded into distance education processes.

COMMUNICATION, INTERACTION, AND MOTIVATION

UNESCO (2002) defines distance education as "any educational process in which all or most of the teaching is conducted by someone removed in space and/or time from the learner, with the effect that all or most of the communication between teachers and learners is through an artificial medium, either electronic or print" (p. 22). Similarly, Moore and Kearsley (2011) define distance education as "teaching and planned learning in which teaching normally occurs in a different place from [the] learning, requiring communication through technologies, as well as special institutional organization" (p. 2). These definitions emphasize the separation of the learners in time and space and further point out the vital ingredient of the distance education which is communication and interaction. Teaching and learning, at a distance or face to face,

is a social process and instructional designers should take into these vital components which are communication and interaction. Supporting the above arguments, Bates (2205) and Bozkurt (2019) argue that, in contrast to earlier assumptions, in 21st-century paradigm, transactional distance matter most than the distance in time and space.

Moore (1983) argues that interaction is required for meaningful learning experiences and he (1989) proposes three types of interaction that is necessary for distance education. These are learner-learner, learner-teacher, and learner-content interaction. Upon a close examination, it can be argued that while learner-learner and learner-teacher interaction refer to the social and affective dimensions; learner-content interaction refers to the cognitive dimension.

A purposeful and systematic interaction between teacher and learner is essential for motivation. At this point, any interaction is important for motivation in all learning environments. Since motivation is not a factor that is directly seen or intervened, teachers should observe the learners and the learning process and ensure effective learning with interactive motivational strategies (Keller, 2010; Ucar, & Kumtepe, 2020). In this context, learners should be analyzed, and effective and systematic interactive motivational strategies should be designed accordingly. Although such a process requires a lot of efforts, it can only be accomplished the results will be rewarding. It should be further noted that it is intrinsic motivation that encourages learners to show self-regulated and self-directed learning skills, and pursue and demand knowledge in their lifelong learning journey.

REDUCING THE TRANSACTIONAL DISTANCE AND DEVELOPING A SENSE OF COMMUNITY

Moore (1993) claims that distance education is a pedagogical model and criticizes the overemphasize on separation in time and space. Accordingly, what matters most is the transactional distance which refers to the psychological distance between and among the learners, instructors, and learning sources. Moore (1993) further notes that "transactional distance is a continuous rather than a discrete variable, a relative rather than an absolute term" (p. 20). Such a view implies that the degree of learning is defined by the educational experiences of the learners and, therefore, perceived learning matters in distance education.

The functions and value of communication and interaction are emphasized in distance education and it is obvious that these components are vital to initiate an educational dialogue. Such an educational dialogue can occur extrinsically between the learners and other learning resources (e.g., teachers, other learners, and learning content) in the outer world or can occur intrinsically with the learner itself in the inner world. No matter where and how educational dialogues occur, there is a need for a social struct and this can be explained by the sense of community (Rovai, 2002), the community of practice (Lave, & Wenger, 1991) and the community of inquiry (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000). Accordingly, learners need a space to build a community such as physical environments as in the face to face education or virtual environments as in the distance education. On the other hand, merely providing an environment is not adequate, yet these environments should have some critical characteristics. For instance, Rovai (2002) reports that spirit, trust, interaction, and commonality of learning expectations and goals are needed to develop a sense of community. Lave and Wenger (1991) highlight the importance of scaffolding learners to gain experiences and this is a shared responsibility by other members of the community. Garrison, Anderson and Archer (2000) argue the importance of teaching, cognitive and social presences in a community of inquiry. In all, there is no single recipe for a meaningful learning experience and distance education is a process formed by the interplay of different concepts.

CONCLUSION: WHAT DO WE HAVE AND WHAT DO WE NEED TO DO?

In brief, theories and conceptual lenses of distance education demonstrate that distance education aims to create a learning ecology where learners can be part of a learning community and expose to learning experiences by communicating, interacting, and motivating. The arguments of this paper are already known and proved facts. If that is the case, why do we do the same mistakes and excuse the systems rather than taking the responsibility? As a response to this query, it can be argued that the opportunities of the 21st century are profound and ample. However, a distance learning ecology reaches its full potential when learners communicate, interact, and are motivated. In this regard, we can argue that rather than simply putting learners and learning resources into the same environments, we need to provide opportunities that learners can communicate and interact. Such a view requires developing an understanding of distance education by benefiting accumulated knowledge of the theory of practice, designing the educational content on these bases, allowing learners to start their journey in their learning ecology, and finally providing opportunities to communicate and interact. Most importantly, it is not the distance in time and space, but the transactional distance that should be reduced. In the end, no matter how well we design distance education and provide critical components, we are bound to fail unless we reduce transactional distance because it refers to psychological, social, and emotional distances.

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